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SUBJECT: Thrown Under the Popemobile? Hanoi Archbishop Submits Letter of Resignation to Ease Path to VN-Vatican Normalization

REF: A) EMBASSY HANOI-EAP/MLS 11/20/09 E-MAIL, B) HANOI 160, C) HANOI 771, D) 08 HANOI 1312, E) 08 HANOI 1093

CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Michalak, Ambassador, State, Hanoi; REASON: 1.4(D)

11. (C) Summary: Sources in the Hanoi Archdiocese have confirmed that embattled Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet has offered to resign, citing health concerns and fatigue. The head of the Vatican's delegation to a Jubilee marking the Catholic Church's 350-year presence in Vietnam told the DCM November 24 that the Pope was considering Kiet's resignation letter, but did not offer further details. The Hanoi Archbishop has long complained of stress and insomnia, but contacts close to Kiet insist that his primary reason for offering to resign is that he does not want to be seen as an obstacle to the normalization of relations between Hanoi and the Vatican. Vietnamese State President Nguyen Minh Triet is scheduled to visit the Vatican December 10-11 to discuss establishing diplomatic ties and a possible Papal visit in 2010, but the planning hit a snag when the Vatican, citing precedence, refused to issue Triet a formal invitation from the Pope. Cardinal Law, attending the Jubilee, asked the U.S. and Italian Ambassador to tell the GVN that Triet will be warmly welcomed if the GVN proposes dates, but he will not receive a formal invitation. End summary.

12. (C) Sources in the Hanoi Archdiocese confirmed recently that Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet had submitted to the Vatican a formal letter of resignation in February, during the visit of Monsignor Pietro Parolin, Holy See Under-Secretary for Relations with States (ref. B). According to Father Thomas Nguyen Xuan Thuy, a Kiet confidant who serves as the Archdiocese's Chief for Administrative Affairs, Parolin had sharply criticized Kiet for his handling of local church land rights disputes with Hanoi officials in 2008 (ref. E). Pressure continued this summer, when in a personal audience with the Pontiff, the Pope instructed Vietnam's Episcopal Council, with Kiet in attendance, to "make personal sacrifices, show restraint in disagreements with the government, and to obey the law" (ref. C). Meanwhile, Kiet was subjected to harsh public criticism from Hanoi officials, most notably Hanoi People's Council Chair Nguyen The Thao, who called for Kiet to be removed.

13. (C) Under fire from both sides, Kiet, in his mid-60s, began to show signs of fatigue and complained of chronic insomnia and stress. Sources close to the Archbishop maintain, however, that Kiet's health is not the primary reason for his offer to resign. Rather, Kiet no longer wished to be seen as an obstacle to the normalization of relations between the Vatican and Hanoi. Whether the Vatican accepts Kiet's offer of resignation, asks him to stay on in Hanoi, or transfers him to another position, possibly in the Vatican, is a separate question. While attending a Jubilee celebration commemorating 350 years of Catholicism in Vietnam on November 24, the DCM queried the Vatican's lead representative, Bernard Cardinal Law, about Kiet's offer of resignation. Cardinal Law confirmed that Kiet's offer to resign was with the Pope, but

declined to offer specifics about the Pope's views or when he would make a decision. Cardinal Law shared the DCM's views that church-GVN land disputes represent legal issues rather than freedom of religion ones, but that the Hanoi People's Council had seriously overstepped in calling for the Archbishop's transfer.

¶4. (C) Cardinal Law told the DCM that President Triet was looking to visit the Vatican December 10-11. The Vietnamese were pressing Vatican officials for an official invitation from the Pope, but the Vatican does not issue such invitations. The Cardinal asked the DCM and the Italian ambassador (who was also in attendance) to convey the following message to the MoFA: if the GVN made its desire for Triet to visit the Vatican known and proposed dates, the Vatican would "respond favorably."

¶5. (C) Comment: During the height of the Hanoi and Quang Binh land-use protests in 2008, the Hanoi Archdiocese expressed frustration at what it characterized as a lack of support from the Vatican. Kiet appeared tired during a meeting with visiting DRL officer in October, but kept his cards close to his chest regarding his health and future plans.B He appeared more energetic during the November 24 celebration, an event attended by more than 60,000 people and one he is credited with organizing. Archbishop Kiet is a realist, however, and he understands that both the GVN and the Holy See have a wider and longer-term perspective. The restoration of relations between Hanoi and the Vatican -- capped by a Papal visit -- would be a significant step for Vietnam's six to eight million Catholics. Embassy Hanoi would appreciate any information Embassy Vatican can provide following President Triet's visit to the Vatican. End comment.
Michalak